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DE RUEHUB #0348/01 1202137

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FM USINT HAVANA

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3183

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HAVANA 000348

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/29/2013

TAGS: CU PGOV

SUBJECT: RAUL CASTRO ANNOUNCES COMMUNIST PARTY CONGRESS FOR
2009

Classified By: COM Michael E. Parmly for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Following the meeting of the 6th plenary of the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) Central Committee, President Raul Castro announced that the next Communist Party congress will be held in the second half of 2009. If it takes place at that time, the congress will be the first full PCC in 11 years. Castro also announced the selection of three new members of the politburo, the formation of seven permanent committees to handle specific issues, and the commutation of the death sentences of all but three of those currently on death row in Cuba. (Left off the list for now were three individuals, a Salvadoran, a Guatemalan and a Cuban-American charged in a series of hotel bombings and killings in the late 1990s.) The changes appear designed to solidify the PCC as the principal governing body in Cuba, and one that is designed to respond to Raul. End Summary

¶2. (C) Cuban President Raul Castro closed the 6th plenary session of the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) Central Committee on April 28 with a speech that points the probable way forward in the transition from the government of Fidel Castro. Raul Castro is the Second Secretary of the party, the title of First Secretary having been retained by brother Fidel. Nevertheless, the speech and Raul's management of the Central Committee meeting showed him to be in full control.

¶3. (C) Perhaps the most important announcement made by Raul was that there would be a full Communist Party congress in the second half of 2009. This will be the first such congress in 11 years. It had been widely speculated that there might be a Party Congress as early as the fall of 2008. The purpose of such a congress would be to decide the future direction of a Cuba without Fidel, and to build the structure in the Party that could replace both Fidel and Raul when the latter passes from the scene.

¶4. (C) The PCC had traditionally been marginalized by Fidel Castro, who preferred his personal style of management to any collective model. Some of the structural changes announced by Raul seem to take the Party in a new direction. He announced the addition of three new members of the Politburo, Ramiro Valdes Menendez, Salvador Valdes Mesa and army general Alvaro Lopez Miera--all individuals with long histories in the revolution and all close to Raul Castro. Also announced was the formation of seven new committees that will report to the Politburo, including: Ideology and Culture, Economy, Agro-food supply, Education, Science and Sports, Health and

International Relations. Not surprisingly, these mirror closely the most important ministries of the Cuban government and may preview the eventual consolidation of ministries promised by Raul in his February speech. One internal observer told us that the ministries themselves will simply become administrative bodies to carry out the decisions made in these committees.

15. (C) Castro devoted significant amounts of time to two issues not directly related to the structure of the PCC institution. One was the importance he gave to achieving real reforms in the agro-industrial sector, which he described as critical at a time of rapidly rising food prices. The other was the commutation of virtually all death sentences on the island. He did not announce the abolishment of the death penalty, stating explicitly that the terrorist threat to Cuba from the United States mandated that the death penalty remain in place. He cited three specific cases which had not been commuted, two of those being a Salvadoran, and a Guatemalan who had been accused of terrorist bombings of hotels in 1997 that led to the death of Italian citizen Fabio de Celmo, and the third that of a Cuban American charged in the assassination of Arcilio Rodriguez Garcia. Nevertheless, he left open the possibility that the Council of State could still commute those sentences too. French Ambassador Dore told COM he views the commutations as a gesture to the EU, in view of the latter's principled opposition to the death penalty. "The Cubans are conscious of our calendar," Dore commented.

16. (C) COMMENT: Raul's management of the central committee meeting and his speech following it were a tour de force of his campaign to take full control of the reigns of government. The formation of the seven committees gives him

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a way around the normal Cuban bureaucracy if he feels he needs it. It is not entirely clear yet why the second half of 2009 was selected for the Party congress, though it is true that there still must be a meeting of the women's mass organization, in flux since the death of its leader and former spouse of Raul Castro, Wilma Espin. Raul also may feel that he is not yet fully prepared to take all of the measures he wishes to, especially with brother Fidel still alive and sometimes kicking. The commutation of the death sentences may indicate a change in heart, but likely has some other more practical objective. Particularly if the sentences of the final three are also commuted, the GOC may believe that the extradition from the U.S. of Luis Posada Carriles will be facilitated.

PARMLY